

Congress Strongly Opposes New Wave of Muslim Refugees

White House plans to allow thousands more refugees into the United States face stiff opposition on Monday in the U.S. Congress, where Republican lawmakers demanded the right to review, and reject, the effort, citing fears of terrorism.

Secretary of State John Kerry on Sunday announced an increase of 15,000 per year for the next two years in the number of refugees the country takes in. He did not say how many would be from Syria.

Under current law, Congress does not have to approve the Democratic administration's plan. But the House of Representatives and Senate, both controlled by Republicans, would have to appropriate money to pay for any expanded effort.

There is support for the effort in Congress, but it would not be an easy sell.

"I think this is a matter of conscience for this country. But I also think admitting more refugees is critical to maintaining and gaining credibility in the region" Senator Chris Murphy, the top Democrat on the Senate's Middle East subcommittee, said.

But many Republicans, and some Democrats, worry that Islamist fighters posing as refugees might sneak into the country.

Republican Senator Jeff Sessions, chairman of a Senate immigration subcommittee and a critic of President Barack Obama's immigration policy, called the plan expensive and dangerous.

"Our schools, job markets and public resources are already

stretched too thin. And, even at current rates, we have no capacity to screen for extremist ideology,” Sessions said.

2016 CAMPAIGN ISSUE

Some Republicans running for president in the November 2016 election have also invoked terrorism fears as they warned against admitting more people.

Murphy said such “demagoguery” is itself dangerous.

“Our enemies make the claim that America is at war with Islam. When people hear that the reason that we’re not admitting Syrian refugees is because we think that there’s an inherent connection between being Muslim and being a terrorist it lends unfortunate power to their argument,” he said.

Rights activists say the Obama administration is doing too little to alleviate a crisis that has displaced half of Syria’s population.

U.S. officials respond by noting Washington is the biggest donor of humanitarian aid. On Monday, the administration announced it was providing \$419 million more, bringing U.S. humanitarian assistance to over \$4.5 billion during the crisis.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said Obama wants to “scale up” the number of refugees admitted, but security concerns and cost mean Congress would have to get behind a more extensive plan.

The House Judiciary Committee said it will have a hearing in early October on admitting Syrian refugees.

Five Republican senators and one Democratic senator wrote to Kerry and Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson last week, urging even tighter screening. The current screening process for Syrians is so strict that only 1,500 have been allowed into the country since the civil war began in 2011.

Representative Michael McCaul, the Republican House Homeland Security Committee chairman, introduced legislation that would give Congress the right to review, and potentially reject, plans to admit refugees.

McCaul's bill would also require officials to prioritize Christians and members of other religious minorities when admitting Iraqis and Syrians.

(Additional reporting by Julia Edwards, Roberta Rampton and Richard Cowan; Editing by Alan Crosby and Lisa Shumaker)

© 2015 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.